

DRUG WAR SENTRIES

Manta Airmen keep drug runners guessing

by **Louis A. Arana-Barradas**
photos by **Tech. Sgt. Cecilio Ricardo**

Flying an E-3 Sentry on a round track over Colombia was easy for Capt. Kristen Thompson. It was her first mission in the war on drugs, but she probably could have done it in her sleep.

She has flown the ungainly looking aircraft with the huge radar strapped to its back over other world hotspots. The job was the same — find the bad guys. And with more than 1,200 flying hours under her belt, she's no rookie.

Still, an 11- to 14-hour counterdrug mission wears on the four aircrew members on the flight deck. Yet the captain and her crew never lost sight of what they had to do.

"We focus on providing a stable platform so the 'backend' guys can do their surveillance job," she said. "At the same time, we monitor the radios to know what's going on in the back."

The jet's backend crew can number up to 36 Airmen. On this mission there were 25, plus three observers, two from Colombia and one from Ecuador. The Airmen operate the business end of the airborne warning and control system aircraft — its powerful radar and other sensors.

The Sentry searches for drug traffickers and, when it finds one, passes the information to the Joint Interagency Task Force South, at Naval Air Station Key West, Fla. That's the headquarters for the region's collective counterdrug effort. The task force directs the surveillance flights based on data gathered mostly from human intelligence sources. This helps narrow the search area.

The Sentry patrols the front lines of the drug war. And what makes it effective is its powerful state-of-the-art radar with its long reach. It needs it to guard the huge battlespace.

"If there's a boat in the water within 200 miles, we'll find it. When we're flying over land looking for aircraft, then we'll see anything within 250 miles of our jet," said Lt. Col. Preston Kise, an AWACS air battle manager in charge of the backend crew. He commanded the 965th Expeditionary Airborne Air Control Squadron, from Tinker Air Force Base, Okla., during its four-month deployment to Forward Operating Location Manta, Ecuador.

Few Americans know about Manta, which lies on Ecuador's southern Pacific coast. But it's a strategic outpost in the war on

Flying high over a stretch of the eastern Pacific Ocean, an E-3 Sentry airborne warning and control system aircraft pulls away from a tanker to continue its surveillance mission aimed at finding drug runners. The 965th Expeditionary Air Control Squadron aircraft deployed to Forward Operating Location Manta, Ecuador, from Tinker Air Force Base, Okla.

drugs. That's because Ecuador lies sandwiched between the globe's top three cocaine producers: Colombia, Peru and Bolivia.

From Manta, Airmen patrol the drug war front lines, an area that stretches over a 4,000-square mile area of the eastern Pacific Ocean and Colombia. It's an area in which drug runners have waged a decades-old battle to smuggle illegal drugs into the United States. They funnel drugs from South American source countries, through Colombia's processing labs, into Central America and then through Mexico into the United States.

Billions of dollars and countless lives are at stake in the drug trade. So even though the four-engine jet doesn't swoop down and drop bombs on them, drug runners fear the Sentry. It's why the shadowy and brutal traffickers go to great lengths, and expense, to stay unseen by the hated surveillance aircraft they know will not go away.

High overhead, the young captain from Anaheim Hills, Calif., banked her jet over the lush South American country. What she wanted was some action — and she got it. The backend crew struck pay dirt five times. That meant five possible drug runners and five possible drug busts.

"It's exciting to hear what's going on over the radio, especially when we're working with the P-3 (Orion), Navy or Coast Guard aircraft or customs guys," she said. "We work together."

Winning the war on drugs takes a team effort. When a Sentry spots a target it sets off a chain of events that could involve players from several agencies and countries.

The task force runs the show, but the Sentry Airmen start the ball rolling. The information the AWACS gathers is priceless to the drug war partners.

"It makes their jobs a lot easier," Lt. Col. Javier Delucca said. The colonel from San Juan, Puerto Rico, commanded Manta's 478th Expeditionary Operations Squadron until August 2007.

The unit supports the Sentry squadron, the KC-135 Stratotank-

er units that refuel them and the other U.S. military and government groups that operate from Manta. The unit operates from a few buildings, a hangar and a few aircraft parking spots on Ecuador's Eloy Alfaro Air Base. And though the Air Force footprint is small, it's big enough to get the job done, the colonel said.

So each day AWACs fly from Manta. When one detects a suspicious fast boat or fishing vessel, the task force springs into action. On scene, Airmen can then direct Navy Orion or Coast Guard C-130 Hercules aircraft in for a closer look or to photograph the suspected trafficker.

"If we see items on (vessels) we think could be drugs, or other suspicious items, then (the task force) will direct a Coast Guard cutter, a Navy vessel or a partner nation's vessel to intercept," Colonel Delucca said.

If there are drugs on the vessel, the task force seizes them and the traffickers.

The partnership works, the colonel said. The task force has

stemmed the flow of drugs and cut the number of illegal drug flights over Columbia by 80 percent. So every mission is vital.

The mission is as important to U.S. national security as the war on terror, Colonel Delucca said. In 2006, Manta Airmen helped intercept almost 260 metric tons of illegal drugs, mostly cocaine. That was the highest figure ever for the task force. In 2007, the task force is on pace to beat that record, he said.

However, many Americans know little, if anything, about what Manta Airmen do. They see television news reports of high-seas drug busts by the Navy or Coast Guard. But they don't connect the Air Force involvement.

What's important is Manta Airmen, and the American and Ecuadorian civilians who work with them, know the importance of their counterdrug mission. They're not on the ground, searching the jungles for cocaine labs. And they aren't on the high seas stopping boats full of drugs. But they know each time drug smugglers meet their end on the high seas, that an Air Force surveil-

lance aircraft was most likely involved.

"Our mission is not the most visible or exciting in the world, but we have our moments," said Colonel Kise, who is from Skaneateles, N.Y. "Knowing we're helping keep drugs off the streets and away from our children motivates you. It keeps us going."

That keep-going attitude garners support from the Ecuadorians. Col. Eduardo Cardenas, who commands the Ecuadorian air force's Combat Wing 23 at the air base, said the American mission at Manta is important because it fights a "plague against humanity."

"The results are very evident," said the colonel from Latacunga, who earned his pilot wings in the United States. "We have seen a decline in the transport of drugs (through Ecuador). Our people know this and I believe they will continue to support this operation."

The Manta operation is due to end in 2009, with the expiration of a U.S.-Ecuador accord that allows American forces to operate



Capt. Kristen Thompson goes through a pre-flight check before a mission over Colombia to find illegal drug runners.



Keeping E-3 Sentry aircraft flying takes teamwork. At Manta, (left to right) Senior Airmen Brian Young and Charles Maerk, Airman 1st Class Sean Preckle and Senior Airman Jason Daly make an engine repair.

from the country. But Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa vowed to not renew the agreement. Colonel Delucca hopes Ecuador will renew the pact. But its president's declaration won't stop the counterdrug mission.

"We'll continue on. And if we have to move, we'll move. But we'll operate from here until the end," Colonel Delucca said.

Until then, AWACs, tanker and other units will continue their daily flights from Manta. That's good for the Air National Guard tanker crews that refuel the big aircraft, said Stratotanker pilot Lt. Col. Lee Hartley. He commanded a 134th Air Refueling Wing element, from McGee-Tyson Air National Guard Base, Tenn., on its first Manta deployment in August.

But refueling the big Sentries isn't easy. Because of its size and radar, it has a bow wave that can rock the tanker. That can make for a rough ride. But it's great training for tanker crews used to refueling smaller fighter aircraft, the colonel said.

"The bigger the airplane, the more it pushes our airplane around in the sky," said Colonel Hartley, who is from Maryville, Tenn. "This can create some significant hurdles for the boom operators to overcome to make sure they can effect a contact."

Even fewer people know about the tanker's mission in the drug war. But Colonel Hartley said that doesn't worry his crews. They know the importance of their counterdrug role.

"We're here for a good cause, one that impacts our people back home and here," he said.

Many Ecuadorians feel the same way. Amalia Reyes, vice director of a school for special-needs children, said she worries about what Manta's future will be like if the Americans leave.


"Who will provide the control? We're afraid we will end up like cities in Colombia, not governed by people, but controlled by drug traffickers," said Mrs. Reyes, who is from Manta. "We aspire to a better life. So the people of Manta are ready to fight to keep the base here."

Manta Airmen don't worry about the politics. They care about doing their jobs. And Captain Thompson doesn't worry about whether or not Manta will remain a strategic outpost in the war on drugs. She worries more about dealing with a tricky aerial refueling. And she's concerned about how to best use the Manta experience to teach and mentor her crew.

But she does like hearing about the arrest of drug traffickers and on how much cocaine didn't make it to the United States. Each time the Manta Airmen have a hand in a drug bust, it makes her feel she's had a personal role in the war on drugs.

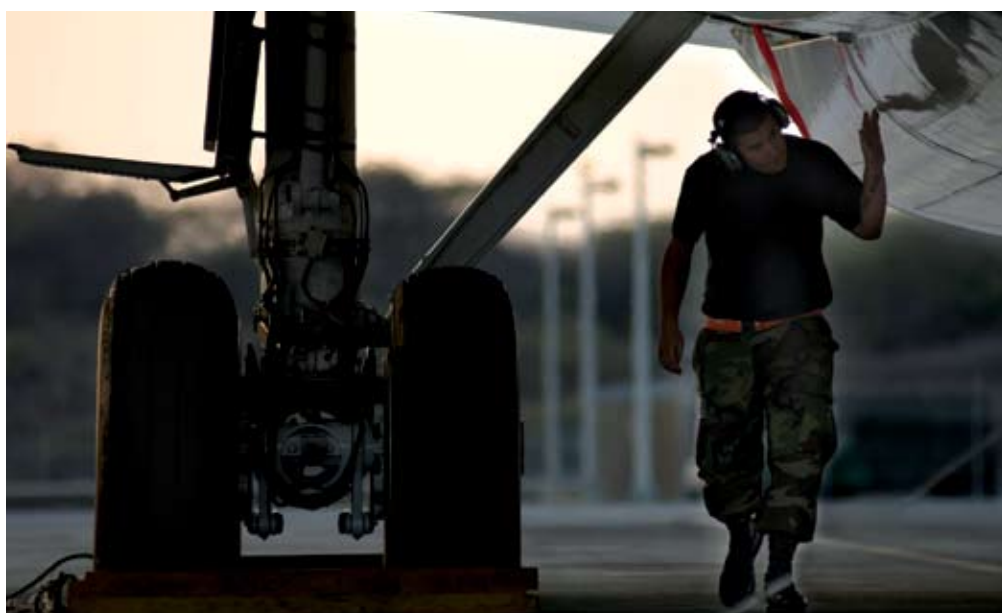
"It's really exciting to know you've

made a difference in the counterdrug war," she said. "That when you see those drug bust figures posted, you know you helped put them there."

The captain's sentiments echo those of most Airmen fighting the war on drugs. They may remain behind the scenes, but they know their mission is making a difference. And they know their duty as drug war sentries, no matter from where they fly, will not end soon. 



An aircrew member boards his E-3 Sentry airborne warning and control system aircraft at Manta before a counterdrug mission.



Doing a post-flight check of an E-3 Sentry is an important job for Senior Airman Charles Maerk. The Airman, and others in the 552nd Aircraft Maintenance Squadron from Tinker, keep the airborne warning and control system aircraft flying its counterdrug mission.

Volunteer spirit part of Manta culture

When not fighting the war on drugs, volunteering is the in thing to do at Forward Operating Location Manta, Ecuador. Most Airmen who deploy there seem to find time to help.

"The spirit of volunteerism has become a part of deploying here," said Chaplain (Capt.) Sam Bridges, of the 478th Expeditionary Operations Squadron. "It's now part of our culture."

Each new rotation of Airmen brings new friends for Manta's residents, who reap the rewards of the Airmen's time, energy, donations and good will.

Manta Airmen help at orphanages, hospitals and clinics, burn centers, community centers, a school for special-needs children — even a baseball school the Airmen started a few years ago. They build and fix things; raise funds; teach English; donate school supplies, clothes, food, stoves and computers; help special-needs children — to name just a few things they do.

"But the best gift we can give is our time," said 2nd Lt. Naomi Evangelista, the squadron's public affairs officer, from Milton, Fla. "By just showing up, it shows we care."

Captain Bridges, of Cartersville, Ga., runs the unit's community relations program.

It has a working group with volunteers representing all the off-base agencies they support. Volunteers present their agency's needs and the committee prioritizes them so everyone gets a fair share.

The captain said there's a plan to export Manta's success story to other forward operating locations. Not to supplant their programs, but to make them more efficient, he said.

But the program's success depends on tanker units that rotate through Manta each month.

"Most of our donations come from Air National Guard units," Captain Bridges said. "They have a big heart. And that's been the driving force behind the things that we donate."

The captain sends each unit deploying to Manta an e-mail that explains the program, asks them to participate and solicits donations based on the needs established by the working group.



Each time Manta Airmen visit the Angelica Flores Institute for Special Education for special-needs children, a lot of merriment erupts. After having photos taken with visiting Airmen, some of the students just fell over each other giggling.

Tech Sgt. Tim Cross went to Manta with the 134th Air Refueling Wing from McGee-Tyson Air National Guard Base, Tenn. He heard of the Manta volunteer effort and wanted help.

"I like to help people better their life, to make their life a little more comfortable," said the KC-135 Stratotanker life support NCO from Oneida, Tenn. "I want to give them the hope that there are people who do care about them. That they're not out there by themselves."

It took Capt. Rafael Alvarado just one visit to a school for special-needs children to become a volunteer. The 965th Airborne Air Control Squadron E-3 Sentry pilot from Queens, N.Y., said he realized how lucky he was after seeing a little girl getting her weekly physical therapy.

"She has the most beautiful eyes, and it made me think of my two healthy children," he said. "I didn't know what, if any, help I could provide. But I knew I wanted to help any way I could."

The Tinker Air Force Base, Okla., pilot is now the school's working group representative.

Captain Bridges said it's hard to comprehend how anybody can go to Manta, see the need the people have and not want to be a part of making things better.

"Being able to help, in any way, is amazing," he said.

— Louis A. Arana-Barradas



When Airmen from Forward Operating Location Manta visit the Angelica Flores Institute for Special Education for special-needs children, a soccer match usually ensues. Second Lt. Naomi Evangelista tried to score against the school team, with help from Capt. Rafael Alvarado (in orange shirt), but to no avail. "They creamed us," the lieutenant said.